

# COMMUNITY SERVICES & FACILITIES

**GOAL** *Community services and facilities that are reliable, responsive, comprehensive and accessible to the public, and which provide a safe and secure environment to all residents of Gastonia.*

## BACKGROUND AND TRENDS

Gastonia's community facilities include all of the buildings owned by the public which are dedicated to providing service to the public. These include City buildings such as the police station and the fire stations, City Hall, the Schiele Museum and other buildings. County buildings include the library, the Emergency Medical Service, and Health and Human Services. Also included in the definition are the Gaston County Schools and Gaston College.

Community services are the various public functions that are directly used by the public, including police and fire protection, schools, the library, the hospital, and others. This chapter focuses on the facilities: whether they are adequate for the efficient delivery of public services, what needs are still to be met, and what changes could be made to increase efficiency and accessibility.

### POLICE PROTECTION

The 2010 Planning Area is covered by two separate law enforcement agencies. The Gastonia Police Department patrols all the areas within the Gastonia City Limits, and the Gaston County Police Department is responsible for the unincorporated areas.

The Gastonia police department employs 218 full-time-equivalent persons, including 165 sworn officers. It is organized into the following functional units:

- Administration
- Criminal Investigation
- Special Investigation
- Patrol
- Community Services

These units work cooperatively among themselves and with the community to sustain and improve public safety and reduce crime and lawlessness. Patrols are also divided geographically, with five patrol districts covering the City.

The police department, through its community policing program, operates three community substations. These substations are located at Spring Valley Drive, Mountain View Apartments and Barkley Street. In addition, the police department has a mobile substation, using a remodeled City bus, that can be quickly moved to different areas of the City as needed.

The City Council, as a part of its capital improvements plan, will be building a new law enforcement center. It will be financed by certificates of participation, with the land and



*Gastonia Police Headquarters*

*The new Gastonia Police Headquarters will open in 1997.*

facility pledged as collateral. The law enforcement center is expected to cost \$10 million. It will be located on the north side of Long Avenue just west of Broad Street, adjacent to the new County Courthouse and Jail. The law enforcement center will have sufficient land and expansion capability to allow for joint use of the building by the City and County Police Departments in the future. The location of the new law enforcement center will enhance the safety and perceived security of the Long Avenue corridor.

## **FIRE PROTECTION**

Fire protection is one of the most fundamental services provided by the City, safeguarding both life and property and working not only to fight fires but also to prevent them. Gastonia Fire Department is a full-time, professional fire-fighting service provided by the City of Gastonia to all areas within the City limits and areas under contract outside the City limits. The City Fire Department has 131 full-time-equivalent employees. The area covered by the City Fire Department has an ISO Class IV rating, resulting in relatively low insurance rates for homes and businesses. Portions of the unincorporated part of the 2010 Planning Area are served by six volunteer fire departments.

The volunteer fire departments covering those unincorporated areas are:

- New Hope
- South Gastonia
- Chapel Grove
- Rhyne
- Union
- Agriculture

The Gastonia Fire Department has seven geographical zones, strategically located to minimize response time for all parts of the City. Each zone has its own fire station, in the following locations:

- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| • Fire Station #1 | Second Ave.         |
| • Fire Station #2 | New Way Drive       |
| • Fire Station #3 | W. Franklin Blvd    |
| • Fire Station #4 | S. New Hope Rd.     |
| • Fire Station #5 | Hudson Blvd.        |
| • Fire Station #6 | Ozark Ave.          |
| • Fire Station #7 | Gaston Day Sch. Rd. |

Gastonia currently has no deficiencies in the coverage provided by the seven fire stations. One area in which it may become necessary to locate a new fire station is along Kings Mountain Highway (US 29/74 west). The need for a new fire station will depend on how far and to what extent the City annexes land along the US 29/74 west corridor. If annexation proceeds to the limits of the present agreement with Kings Mountain, then Fire Station #3 will probably have to be replaced with a new station in a location farther west to preserve response time.

In general, the criteria for locating new fire stations include:

- The need for fire protection and the time-distance relationship of the station to built-up areas;
- The location and extent of high-value districts, such as industrial areas, shopping centers, office parks, apartment complexes;

- Fire district regulations; and
- Past experience of the fire department.

The cities and towns surrounding Gastonia which have their own fire protection include Bessemer City, Dallas, Ranlo, Lowell and Cramerton, all of which are primarily volunteer-staffed.

## **EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES**

Gastonia and Gaston County use modern emergency response systems, based on enhanced 911 service. The 911 is a combined emergency dispatch system with one telephone number for police, fire and emergency medical service. Both Gastonia and Gaston County operate 911 systems.

Gaston Emergency Medical Services (GEMS) is operated by the County and responds to medical emergencies by providing initial patient assessment and treatment using paramedics trained and equipped to Advanced Life Support standards, with radio communications to hospitals and physicians. GEMS provides strategically located units throughout the City and County to minimize response time.

## **CITY OFFICES**

Gastonia City Hall, located downtown at Franklin Boulevard and South Street, is an historic structure

dating to 1922. In its initial years, the City Hall housed all of the City departments, including the police and fire departments. As Gastonia has grown over the past 75 years, the City administration has outgrown the City Hall. Only the central administrative departments and departments that deal extensively with the public remain in the City Hall vicinity today. Nonetheless, the City has outgrown City Hall and must supplement it with office space in two nearby buildings, separated from City Hall by two busy streets.

With departments divided between several buildings, efficiency and convenience to the public has been reduced. Bringing all of these departments back together would both increase efficiency and allow the public easier access to City services.

A new City Hall should be located downtown, which is still the most accessible area to all residents of Gastonia. Possible solutions include:

- A new municipal building on the old Courthouse land, joined to the existing City Hall;
- A new City Hall on another site downtown; or
- A combined City-County government center that would house both Gastonia and Gaston County administrative offices.

## **SCHIELE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**



*The Schiele Museum of Natural History & Planetarium*

The Schiele Museum of Natural History, a facility of the City of Gastonia, is truly one of our community's greatest and best-known assets. The museum has the largest collection of land mammal specimens in the Southeast, an expanded planetarium, and it conducts archeological research and extensive outreach programs with school systems in 46 North Carolina Counties. Outside the Schiele museum is a mile-long loop shaped nature trail, which is also the site of a replica of a

Catawba Indian Village and a pioneer backcountry settlement.

The Schiele Museum has sufficient land to accommodate the growth and expansion anticipated by 2010.

## **GASTON COUNTY LIBRARY**

The Gaston County Library is funded and administered by Gaston County, with the main branch of the library located in Gastonia on Garrison Boulevard. The library provides educational, informational, recreational and cultural materials to the residents of the County.

Gaston County, in cooperation with the City of Gastonia, has established a small branch library in the Erwin Community Center, located in Gastonia's Highland neighborhood. The branch is open from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m., five days a week.

A longer range goal for the City of Gastonia should be a full-service branch library located on the west side of the City. Achievement of this goal depends on a number of factors: the willingness of the County to invest in and operate another branch, available land, funding from other sources, and possible joint use of land and parking. The "Gastonia-West Branch Library" is in its infancy as a concept, but with commitment and creativeness on the part of the City, it could be a reality well before



*Gaston County Public Library Main Branch on Garrison Blvd. in Gastonia*

2010.

## **GASTON COUNTY SCHOOLS**

The Gaston County School System is responsible for the public education system and is in the process of implementing a long-term plan that will address facility needs and reorganize the district to a middle-school format. Under the new format elementary schools will house grades K-5, middle schools grades 6-8, and high schools grades 9-12. The plan, known as the South Proposal, addresses a number of concerns, including: program inequities, outdated facilities, racial balance, overcrowding in growth areas and under-use of some schools.

The South proposal includes the construction of two new schools: a high school to be located adjacent to Bess Elementary School, and a middle school in the vicinity of Cramerton to serve the southeast portion of the County. The middle school is now under construction, and the high school construction will commence in late 1995. Additions and enhancements are planned for Ashbrook, Bessemer City, East Gaston, Hunter Huss, North Gaston and South Point High Schools to accommodate the movement of the ninth grade to the high schools.

Other changes to physical facilities under the South proposal are:

- Cherryville South will be converted to a middle school
- Highland Jr. High will be renovated and converted to office space in order to consolidate school administration offices.
- Arlington, Gastonia Central and High Shoals elementary schools will be closed.
- Renovations and replacements to improve 17 schools, ensuring that all schools meet North Carolina school facility guidelines.

The South proposal will be financed by General Obligation Bonds totaling \$57,125,000. After implementation of the proposal, the Gaston County

Schools will have 40 total schools, including one new high school, one new middle school and four additional elementary schools. The County also operates two special education facilities and Gaston College. Gaston County also has nine independent and/or religious schools.

## PROPOSED CIVIC CENTER

The Civic Center Task Force is studying market conditions, possible sites and financing options for a Gastonia/Gaston County Civic Center. A Civic Center would bring more entertainment opportunities to Gastonia, be a place for large community meetings, and an aid to economic development, including the possible development of a first-class hotel. The Civic Center could also attract small conventions and meetings.

Funding, site location and whether this would be a City or County facility have not yet been finalized. If the Civic Center is approved, however, it would be built within the time frame of this plan.

## OTHER PUBLIC FACILITIES

The following is a list of other public facilities operated by the City of Gastonia or Gaston County.

- **Farmer's Market:** Located on Long Avenue, the Farmer's Market is housed in an all-weather building and provides an opportunity for direct sales by farmers and fresh produce and other products to consumers.
- **Downtown Parking:** The relocation of the railroad to a grade-separated cut resulted in the elimination of some of the downtown parking. Sufficient parking is important to downtown's future, and the City will be improving and upgrading the surface parking lot through paving and landscaping. The downtown surface parking lot could be designed and graded to accommodate a future parking deck as demand grows. Improvements in parking should be accompanied by enhancements to the pedestrian crossings over the railroad.
- **Health and Human Services:** The County will be building a \$12 million Social Services Center on Long Avenue. The new Social Services Center will consolidate those formerly scattered functions in one location, improving efficiency and delivery of services. A new County Health Department building was constructed in 1989 and is currently being expanded.

## ISSUES

1. The Gastonia Police Department has been lacking a modern police headquarters. A new law enforcement center will greatly enhance the police department's ability to render law enforcement service.
2. The City and County have separate 911 systems, a service which would run more efficiently if consolidated.
3. Gastonia has outgrown its 1920's-era City Hall, which only can house a portion of the City administration. This hampers efficiency and decreases convenience for the public.
4. Although Gastonia is the largest city in Gaston County, it is served by only one full-service library, supplemented by the limited-hours Erwin Center branch. In addition, the main library is no longer located downtown, but rather on the east side of the City.
5. The Schiele Museum is one of Gastonia's most visible community assets. Sufficient funding, management and maintenance will be required to sustain the museum's excellence.
6. Although some of the important public facilities in Gastonia are operated by the County or the Schools, decisions made by the City will affect the future of those facilities.
7. Gastonia and Gaston County have a lack of facilities for large meetings and cultural and entertainment events.
8. Overcrowding of schools is occurring in the growth areas of Gaston County, even as other schools in the system are under used.
9. Racial balances at some schools, primarily within the City of Gastonia, are diverging from the racial balance of the overall system. This includes both schools that have high minority enrollment and schools that have very low minority enrollment.
10. Socio-economic balances are also shifting in similar fashion primarily in schools within the City of Gastonia. This has led to differences in the perceived desirability of various schools.

# OBJECTIVES AND TOOLS

**Objective 1:** *Provide physical facilities that enhance rather than hinder the ability of the City's police and fire departments to provide their essential services.*

- 1-a)** Construct a new law enforcement center on Long Avenue, adjacent to the new Courthouse and Jail.
- 1-b)** Continue operating the community police substations, and explore opportunities to establish new community policing facilities where needed.
- 1-c)** Use the mobile police substation to respond quickly to neighborhood crime problems.
- 1-d)** As the City annexes land along the western US 74 corridor, consider relocating Fire Station #3 if it will improve response time and fire protection to the west side of Gastonia.
- 1-e)** Work toward consolidation of the City and County 911 services to eliminate confusion and duplication of service.

**Objective 2:** *City administrative facilities should be structured to provide the most convenience to the public and efficient delivery of service as possible.*

- 2-a)** Any new or expanded City and County administrative offices should be located in downtown Gastonia.
- 2-b)** The City of Gastonia and Gaston County should explore the option of constructing a joint City-County government center.

**Objective 3:** *Gastonia should have library facilities that are accessible to people in all parts of the City.*

- 3-a)** Retain the main library branch in the City of Gastonia.
- 3-b)** Continue operating the Erwin Center branch library.
- 3-c)** Support the establishment of a new full-service branch library located on the west side of the City.

## Policy References

**Community Facilities:** 2-b;  
**Built Environment:** 4-a;  
**Land Use:** 6-c

**Community Facilities:** 2-a

**Land Use:** 1-b, 2-d

**Objective 4:** *Gaston County Schools should provide facilities that best meet the needs of students.*

- 4-a)** Support the South Proposal for new school construction and conversion to a middle school format.
- 4-b)** Support the redrawing of school attendance lines in conjunction with the South proposal in order to address growing imbalances in the socio-economic makeup of schools in Gastonia.

**Housing:** 5-g; **Land Use:** 1-b

**Objective 5:** *Determine whether to build a Civic Center to provide space for meetings, community functions, and entertainment, sporting and cultural events in Gastonia and the surrounding region.*

- 5-a)** The size and quality of the Civic Center should be based on a reasonable evaluation of the funds that can be raised both privately and by the public.
- 5-b)** Due to the regional impact of the Civic Center, the City should advocate joint City-County participation in the project, with the public portion of the funding from a countywide bond referendum.
- 5-c)** The Civic Center should be located in or near Gastonia, and in a location where it can stimulate additional private development in its vicinity. Possible locations include: within the Central Sector, on the western side of Gastonia, or along the Interstate 85 corridor.

**Economy:** 6-d; **Land Use:** 1-d

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